

Partial Transcript of Facebook Live COVID-19 Town Hall

Live-streamed Tuesday, 24 March, 2020

From the MCoE/Fort Benning Public Affairs Office, Suite W-141, McGinnis-Wickam Hall

Time of live-stream: 1800-1900 hours, approx.

Panel:

- Maj. Gen. Gary M. Brito, commanding general, U.S. Army Maneuver Center of Excellence and Fort Benning
- Col. Matthew Scalia, commander, U.S. Army Garrison Fort Benning
- Col. Melissa J. Hoffman, commander, Martin Army Community Hospital and Medical Activity

Moderator:

- Benjamin L. Garrett, Chief of Public Affairs, MCoE/Fort Benning

Link to town hall meeting:

<https://www.facebook.com/FortBenningMCoE/videos/2325758644382037/>

MG BRITO:

Greets audience, then:

"If you recall just last week we had our first COVID-19 town hall, and we'll look to schedule one of these weekly as long as we need to do it to keep our public and our families and our Soldiers informed. In addition to these town halls, we may have some special video clips by some of the staff to address some special topics throughout, and those'll be posted on our COVID-19 page.

"First of all I want to really want to thank you for your support, your understanding and your cooperation, which are three things I asked for last week, and will continue to ask for the entire community, and all the moms and dads that are out here as well.

"We have received a ton of questions, almost 50, on our COVID-19 page since publicizing this town hall."

"Last week I mentioned that this threat is real and is spreading. And it is indeed touched the boundaries and touched Fort Benning. To date we have three confirmed positive COVID-19 cases associated with the Army and Fort Benning, Georgia, the last of which was just validated a few hours ago, and we have since published a medical release on that.

"Now team, unfortunately, and you're watching the same national and local news that I am, this number will grow and it will have some impacts, most likely, on the Soldiers and families and civilians here in Fort Benning.

"To date, we have sampled over three dozen, and we also have 478 in some level of quarantine. I don't want that very high number to alarm you. I do want to explain it. I'm not gonna break down what the 478 are but quite simply the 478 includes Soldiers that have deployed, getting ready to deploy or redeploying, whether going in or out, or simply put, in broad terms, they're going to some level of quarantine, 14 days, to ensure that none of 'em have symptoms or have been infected by the disease, by COVID-19.

"Very critical. Not any different from some of the practices you've seen across the nation. Some of those are home quarantines, from self-reporting, either because they've been exposed they think, or know, with someone that had the disease or traveled to and from a country that is impacted, like Italy or South Korea, or perhaps just not feeling well, and have opted to self-quarantine, whether at their home or their barracks or at a location that we can provide them, we have provided them, here on Fort Benning."

"And some, quite frankly, have screened and have no symptoms but have decided to err on the safe side. So I would say that number 479 is a good thing."

"Now, more importantly, I'm a husband and a father myself, for the moms and dads that are out there and all the loved ones across America, we do not have any positive COVID-19 cases in a training base right now, where your Soldiers, your sons and daughters are going through a One-Station Unit Training, more commonly referred to by many as basic training. And the same for all of the students that we have going through from private, PV 1, up to colonel, in some of the respective courses now."

"No confirmed cases in our training base. Now I'm not gonna be naive and say that it may not happen. But we'll continue to screen, we'll continue to adopt the best protection and mitigation measures that we can, for all of our Soldiers."

"So at this time, for those moms and dads that have entrusted us to train your Soldiers, and sent them here, at this point, no confirmed cases on Fort Benning."

"I do want to talk to a few issues and relate it to the three positive cases that we have here, and relate it to Fort Benning proper."

"I'm gonna spell it out first. The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, more commonly known as HIPPA. HIPPA is the law, and we're not gonna violate the law. And I offer that up only because of the questions, some of which have been kind of animated, on how much transparency we're gonna have.

"So I will tell you, when we have a known case associated with Fort Benning, whether he or she, that person, is a civilian, Soldier, family member. And we will tell you whether they live off-post, like we have in the previous cases, or whether they live on-post.

"But in accordance with the law, which we're not gonna violate, there are some things that I will not, quite simply won't talk to.

"Like providing the actual name of the person, their gender, their address, or we will not refer to the direct affiliation to the Army or to Fort Benning in this case.

"And that talks to some of the vagueness, to use some of the words that I've seen on social media, on the cases that we have had.

"So please understand that's very important to protect the person that has been identified as a positive case or just screened. No different than we would for anybody that come into our hospital or any other hospital, for any other medical case.

"So I do please ask for your understanding and your support on that. We will be as transparent as we can.

"This is not a shell game. It is not an attempt to be elusive. We just will follow the law.

"And I would also add that all of the cases that we learn of, that are positive, will be reported to the Georgia Department of Public Health, and as we've seen in all cases so far, those cases will be categorized in the counties in which that person lives.

"So I'll give an example. If a Soldier in the future comes up as a positive COVID-19 case and he or she lives on Fort Benning proper, we'll notify you when we announce it, that the Soldier lives on Fort Benning, but that category will be against the count for Muskogee County.

"The same thing if a Soldier works on Fort Benning, and lives in Lee County, Alabama, you'll know we have a case on Fort Benning but that case'll be counted against Lee County, Alabama, in accordance with the respective states' public health laws.

"I don't offer that up to belittle anybody or to insult any intelligences at all, but I wanted to clarify the reporting procedures that we are going to continue to follow.

"On a note of training, Fort Benning is one of many places that continues to train thousands and thousands of Soldiers annually. Quite frankly even aside from COVID-19 while 69,000 are trained here every single year, from the OSUT One-Station Unit Training up through Airborne School and many of the functional schools that we have. In broad terms, the Army's mission will not stop. It can't stop.

"Many of the functional schools that we have will continue to rock and roll, on my terms, we're gonna continue to train, within some limitations. And that's everywhere from the noncommissioned officer courses, professional military education, and the same that we offer the officers as well from lieutenant all the way up to lieutenant colonel.

"At this point as we'll also continue to receive future Soldiers. And those Soldiers, the young men and women that the parents have entrusted to join the Army and taken an oath, they will report here to Fort Benning as well, although perhaps in smaller numbers over the next couple of months.

"We will continue to receive them, train them, and prepare them to join the many, many units, all components across the United States Army, and support that Army's mission that I mentioned up front.

"Now I understand our necessity to continue to train and execute our mission does bring a little bit of nervousness to some of the families and Soldiers. And I do understand that. Please trust me.

"I will narrow in on one of the big population of future Soldiers that comes at Fort Benning and some of the mitigation measures that both the Army, through Department of Defense and Fort Benning, is implementing to mitigate the risk.

"For new Soldiers that are comin' in, I'll just pick from XX state, comin' in to Fort Benning, whether that be via bus, a train or plane, most likely bus or plane, three levels of screening will take place.

"They will be screened before they get on that mode of transportation and come to Fort Benning. A series of questions: 'Have you been to one of these countries?' 'Are you in a heavily impacted state?' 'How do you feel right now?' 'Let me take your temperature.' And that's initial level of screening.

"I would also add that our reception battalion has the ability to screen at the airport. And they're doing that and doing it very effectively right now. So in essence a fourth level if you would.

"And when that Soldier moves on, has the approval to move on to Fort Benning, again, whether at the airport or before they enter the training footprint, the reception battalion, we conduct another level of screening through the questions I just mentioned, a temperature check and seeing how he or she feels, before they enter the formation.

"And that specifically for the trainees in the same broad terms, applies to many of the students that are coming through here as well.

"I will also offer up, that at my level and also delegated down to the brigade commanders and the battalion commanders and the sergeant majors, that executing the reception activities, we can make the call for when a person shows up and they may be coming from one of those states that is heavily hit, like New York state at this time, and move he or she directly from their mode of transportation, after their screening to a safe quarantine location to ensure that we minimize the risk of any COVID-19 spreads.

"Especially for those Soldiers who may not be showing any symptoms whatsoever but may be comin' from one of those states or areas that shows more risk.

"And I can assure you that is being done quite well at this point, through our reception battalion and the brigades that receive the Soldiers. And I'm confident that they're gonna continue to do so.

"For Soldiers that are here raining here now, and I'll just broadly speak to all ranks, as you all know we're gonna continue our training. The travel ban remains in effect at this point. And that travel ban is not allowing Soldiers that are here on what's called a Permanent Change of Station, PCS orders, to move.

"So when they complete their training here at Fort Benning and it's within, to the left of 11 May, which is the current travel ban, we will offer opportunities one, for them to continue to train and hone their skills here at Fort Benning, take care of them, shelter down, and minimize any risk they have to the viruses.

"To go back on the trainees, I know this is a near and dear question of which we receive many from the parents and families now.

"But when the Soldiers graduated at their One-Station Unit Training, regardless of their specialty skill at this point, as of now they will remain here at Fort Benning and we're working with the Army, through Department of Defense policies, on how and when they will be shipped to their gaining unit.

"I cannot put a time line on that now. Not that I'm on at the decision level, but that is to be determined by our bigger enterprise, and we will ensure through our brigade social media pages, through the information pages, other forums like this, that you will know when your Soldier can move on.

"That talks to some of the travel ban issues.

"I talked a little bit about quarantine in the beginning. Again, we have the, I have the authority to also look at exceptions to policies for people that need to move on for whatever reason within the travel ban.

"And that may be due to some severe emergency leave, or some other mitigation measure that has to take place, or an important mission, and trust me, those numbers will be in the single digits, if at all. Okay?

"On the note of essential workers, I know that has been a big concern of many.

"Now, it is a concern of mine as well because we want to quite frankly thin the lines and minimize the footprint in the workplace. That includes this headquarters and all the other locations across Benning, not just Training and Doctrine Command but all the tenant organizations as well.

"So, we've taken a look at all the folks we have working, whether green suits, civilians that support our mission. And down at brigade commander-level I've given the authority for them to just simply thin the lines and send these folks home. And keep 'em home, for a while.

"And I'm setting the example upstairs with my personal team and secretary as well.

"We've also maximizing telework opportunities, so sending folks home with laptops to do their work, leveraging social media, Facetime to do your work as well.

"So all those opportunities have been pushed down. Can we do a better job? We're gonna continue to assess, continue to determine who needs to be at work, thin the lines to minimize the risk to that person and minimize the risk to our important training base of the Soldiers.

"So that does not fall on deaf ears. We'll continue to refine that as we go on.

"Now there's some other measures in place. And I know I'm taking a lot of the air time from my team here. But there's a lot of measures in place to assist us in social distancing, managing physical distance and the simple risk that our Soldiers may be opened up to.

"Through our great command sergeant majors we have some courtesy patrols on post. And they're goin' to places like the barber shop, the commissary, and the PX. Gas stations, some of those simple places where it's easy and natural to be close, and helpin' us to enforce the physical distance needed to keep all our Soldiers safe. And that's turning out to be, working well for us so far.

"Additionally, the garrison commander will talk to it in a moment. We've adjusted some of the hours to the PX and commissary. I'm looking at the same for our pharmacy and hospital. And Col. Hoffman will talk to that soon.

"And since the last town hall, we've implemented some more strict should I say, visitation policies in place. I have the authority in the space to ramp those up some more should the conditions deem necessary. But at this point we'll continue to look at that. Okay.

"I've talked to the travel ban. I also want to talk to some future decisions that I may have. One I just talked about. Visitation policies, which I know is near and dear to many. Now there is another level that we can ramp it up to. Quite simply, you just have, if you don't have an ID card, you don't get in.

"We'll work that with garrison and ensure it is publicized very well and early, in the event I should need to go there. And the garrison commander can look at some of the exception policies as well. I understand illnesses, ID cards, other appointments that need to take place. And that can be looked at on a case-by-case basis.

"We may also look at some of the additional closures of places on post like the shoppettes. I mentioned the commissary and the PX. Things that we need to sustain quality-of-life right now. We'll look at that as well.

"And lastly, working with the superintendent of our DoDEA schools on post. We will look at when schools will reopen. I will tell you know and it goes through spring break which I think I know is the third of April, right now the schools'll be closed till then.

"We will likely mirror whatever our surrounding counties do, and the state does. And I know there's different levels, of, different varying levels of home school work, using a variety of means for our students.

"But I will keep you informed when and if we need to make that decision. But I do expect it to be mirrored or whatever through our respective counties are gonna to do for the public schools. I will try to do the same for those who use our private schools as well. So with that, I've taken enough air time, I would like to turn it off to the hospital commander, Col. Hoffman. I do know we have a lot of questions in here lane. Thank you.

COL HOFFMAN:

"Thank you, sir. Good evening. I'm Col. Melissa Hoffman, your hospital commander. My continued priority is the safety and care of you, our valued patients, your families, my staff and their families and the integrity of our health care facilities.

"General Brito, I really appreciate the efforts we as a team are putting forth to keep the Fort Benning community informed regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I assure you the health care team has been working around the clock to stay ahead of the current situation and ensure all of our safety to the best of their abilities.

"I can't stress enough the value in following the established CDC guidelines. Those include staying at home if you aren't feeling well. If you must go out, avoiding large crowds. Washing your hands frequently. Don't touch your face. Wipe down frequently used items and surfaces.

"We continue to screen everyone presenting for care at every facility across the Martin footprint. We have set up a pre-screening area for all to include our staff, prior to entering the main facility.

"The screening includes answering the following questions: Why are you here today? Are you here for an appointment or are you sick? If you are sick and you need to be seen in our ER you will be expedited to the rear of the tent for additional screening. Have you had contact with a COVID-19-infected person? Or have you had any recent travel, especially to those areas that have been identified as high-risk by the CDC? And lastly, of course, 'Do you have a temperature, a cough, are you experiencing shortness of breath, or a sore throat?'

"You will then have your temperature taken, and based on all the above questions, you'll be directed to enter the main hospital through the ER entrance or you'll be directed to the rear of the structure for additional screening.

"Again, anyone who doesn't have a need to seek care in person is advised to stay at home. if you're not feeling well, have questions, or your symptoms worsen, we advise you to please call our Nurse Advice Line. Again that's 1-800-874-2273, and please select option 1.

"Also on our hospital facebook page, there is a comprehensive list of frequently asked questions, and further details on other ways to access the nurse advice line utilizing their app, and also information on secure messaging, to aid you in scheduling a telemedicine visit.

"In addition we have activated a COVID-19 hotline internal to Martin Army. This will become active tomorrow morning at 0900.

"So if you are unable to gain contact through the nurse advice line, please contact our COVID-19 hotline at this number: 762-408-2819. We will also put this information out on our Facebook page and our external page as well.

"We have also set up a separate pharmacy check-in area external to the main hospital. You have the option to be pre-screened and proceed to the pharmacy inside the main hospital if you wish. Or we have arranged seating to ensure safety and social distancing. Or there's also an option allowing you to remain external to the facility and return at a later time, to pick up your prescription at an area on the hospital campus, but away from the main entrance of the hospital.

"We are also in the process of taking our refill pharmacy service external to the PX as well. Utilizing the side parking lot adjacent to the PX refill area, we are developing a similar setup where you the patient will provide your identifying information to a team member outside the building who would then retrieve your refill and bring it to you while you wait in your car. We hope to have this fully operational by this week.

"In the meantime, you can continue to pick up your refills in the PX, again observing social distancing in the waiting area.

"In addition, please keep in mind you can request your prescription to be transferred to a local Tricare network pharmacy or you can sign up for home delivery through Express Scripts. Call the pharmacy directly and they can assist you with either one of these options.

"We continue to proactively assess all of our previously scheduled appointments and procedures, and continue to work with our patient population to reschedule them if at all possible to a later date and time.

"We are also doing our best to do what we can telephonically or through our virtual health capabilities, again with the sole intent of providing for the safety of you, our valued patients, and of course our health care team as well.

"We have also altered our visitation policy in relation to the current situation. We are not allowing visitors to our in-patient areas or additional persons to accompany the patient for an appointment.

"Exceptions are being considered for our pregnant and new moms, pediatric patients and our elderly or handicapped, on a case-by-case basis. Again the intent is to cut down on foot traffic throughout the hospital and to ensure the safety of all our patients and our staff.

"The recent confirmation of three of our beneficiaries for COVID-19, I would like to update you on our testing process...

***COL HOFFMAN OUTLINES TESTING PROCESS, AND RELATED DETAILS, THEN
HANDS OFF TO CG***

MG BRITO:

"Thanks, Melissa. If I could expand on one thing. I've also asked the hospital staff to do some very deliberate planning to preserve their ability to deal with COVID-19 issues, if they should expand, but also be able to take care of stuff that just happens.

"So moms having babies, still happens. To all the moms and dads that are out there that have Soldiers going through One-Station Unit Training. Soldiers hurt their ankles and other things. That still happens.

"So I've asked them, both at Martin Army Hospital, and our treatment facilities, to maintain that capability to take care of our troops. It's continuing to get warm here in Georgia as well and we'll have to deal with heat injuries as well, for all ranks. So we'll preserve that capability but yet, our main effort will be able to deal with COVID-19 issues.

"Matt, I'm sure many have some garrison concerns, so I'll turn the floor to you."

COL SCALIA:

"Thank you, sir. Ladies and gentlemen, good evening. Col. Matt Scalia, your garrison commander.

"We all share the same priorities and that is protection of our Soldiers, families and really all those residents and those associated with Fort Benning, including you know many retirees and veterans living off-post who visit us on a regular basis.

"I'd like to address three things with you this evening, specifically. One is, follow up on the gate access that we implemented last week, and then two, new policies which you will see posted by tomorrow morning, regarding commissary and PX hours, for special customers, and then Villages of Benning residents policy as well.

"So first, gate access. You'll recall last week, at the direction of General Brito, we implemented some travel restrictions for access to the installation. Have had a lotta questions, which we anticipated, and I've given some good guidance to the guards at the welcome center so they could help implement this and answer those questions and make some decisions within the intent.

"So, we've posted a frequently asked questions on the website, where you can I think get a lot of your questions answered.

"We will update that as new questions arise. There are a lot of different and specific individual situations out there that we just couldn't capture all in a policy, but we do want to address and on an individual basis.

"Some of these exceptions to policies include: deliveries to your house. Personal medical services. If you have a special medical appointment at your home, a physical therapist perhaps, that would be a reason for access to the gate.

"Grandparents coming to see a newborn child and to help out at the home would be another exception to policy we would be happy to grant.

"And if you have long-term visitors at the home, we can grant that as well. Okay. So please have the visitors, even better, you beforehand, visit the welcome center, have the discussion with the guards there, and they can help walk you through it.

"Okay, so two new policies you'll see, tomorrow. First is the commissary and PX shopping hours for high-risk people as described by the CDC.

"Okay. We're going to reserve shopping time for them at the commissary and PX main store every day between nine and 10. Now they can shop any hour, it's open, but we'll restrict access for them between nine and 10 in the morning.

"This allows them greater protection, as they are higher risk population, again as described by the CDC.

"Some examples, and you'll see this in the policy but you can also get it from the CDC website. If you're age 65 years or older, you have a chronic lung disease, moderate to severe asthma, serious heart conditions, or if you're pregnant. And there are some other categories. That's just a few. But want to take care of that population.

"We will implement that starting Thursdays. And this allows tomorrow, people go as they may already have schedules planned for shopping, first thing. But this will go into effect on Thursday morning.

"The next policy. Again, as our priority's protection of all those who live, work, visit Fort Benning, is safety. That includes the work force here. So we've had some concerns with some self-quarantined families who reside here in Fort Benning, not informing work force, maintenance workers, as they're coming in and continue to come in, for urgent and emergency work orders.

"This policy states that it is the family's responsibility to report their self-quarantine as directed by medical professionals or chain of command, to our Fort Benning garrison housing office so that they can then verify, before a crew goes to a residence, whether or not it's self-quarantined.

"Now I hope the right thing to do is any family that is self-quarantine, would inform the crew before they come that they are self-quarantines. They can take the right measures.

"If you have an emergency work order, if you have a busted pipe or some other emergency that has to be taken care of, they will respond but they need to do so with the right equipment and properly prepared. So that will be published tomorrow.

"Lastly, we still have a lot of people working here on Fort Benning. We've had to close some services. As I informed you last week, a lot of the services we've had to close is because of diminished work force.

"As we can all appreciate, with schools out and some workers and some parents having to stay at home for their children, without school, or child care, that has had an obvious impact on our workforce.

"So that's why we've had to, see adjustments in shoppettes, PX stores, some hours at the commissary. So, when you are on post, and you're shopping or you're getting a takeout, one of the restaurants, you're getting groceries at the commissary, please thank those employees who are still making the time and the effort to provide us these services.

"Sir, thank you."

MG BRITO: "Thank you, Matt.

MG Brito turns to moderator for questions, Moderator first asks COL Hoffman about new hospital COVID-19 hotline, double-checking phone number and start date of service, for benefit of audience. COL Hoffman replies, then moderator asks first question.

MODERATOR: Reading question: "I would like to ask about overcrowding in regard to incoming and graduating Soldiers. I understand essential military operations must continue. However with recruits continuing to come to Fort Benning for basic training but no one is PCS-ing out of here, where will graduating recruits go?"

MG BRITO:

"Sure. That's a very good question and for a little bit of context, especially for those who have been to Fort Benning before, this is a big place. Through our commanders, garrison and command sergeant majors we have actually gone to the level of detail of counting every single bunk and where we could put Soldiers as they graduate. This is not only in what's formally known as Sand Hill and Harmony Church where the Soldiers train and will graduate.

"We know exactly where the beds are, how much space we have now, and how much space could be used for graduating Soldiers, and to put in my grunt terms, simply to manage the flow in and the flow out, as new recruits come and recruits graduate.

"So almost to the pillow I know where guys, guys and girls, young Soldiers, can sleep safely, cleanly, and in a healthy environment, upon graduation.

"In addition to that we've looked at the other spaces on Fort Benning. We have barracks space in what's known as Kelly Hill. We have our 1st SFAB and some other places across the installation. In addition have taken some prudent measures to look at places where we could build some additional holdover space in the event that the [word/s indistinct] that they're sending in, doesn't come on and come on soon enough.

"So that is very important. We want to put [word/s indistinct] a safe clean environment for Soldiers that are graduating, and in some respects for non-one station unit training Soldiers that are gonna stay here as well.

"I would say there's some ongoing actions now between the higher headquarters on safe and secure means to move graduating Soldiers to their first units of assignment.

"And the ongoing analysis [word/s indistinct] is something soon, is to take a cohort, I'll call it a large group of Soldiers from Fort Benning, and I'll just make an example. Let's just say we have 100 soldiers that are all going to Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

"So putting that group of Soldiers onto a clean and secure, sanitized mode of transportation, just going to Fort Bragg maybe a bus, and move them, as a clean cohort, to that location. Versus having to put said Soldiers either traveling with family, civilian buses or civilian airlines.

"And that same concept in broad terms applies to many installations. Of course, once it's implemented and if it's implemented, of course that would be a challenge if you're moving from Fort Benning to Fort Lewis, Washington. But all that is being looked at as well between our Training and Doctrine Command, and Forces Command that owns the respective units.

"So Ben, that's probably a long answer to talk to how we're gonna manage the in and out flow of Soldiers and that's under the current conditions of the travel ban and the guidance we have.

Thank you."

COL SCALIA

"Sir, may I add to that?

COL Scalia says we're trying to provide for those Soldiers who might eventually be in a "holdover status" MWR and AAFES trying to provide "recreational activities" for those Soldiers "so they have something to do in this time."

MODERATOR: Reads next question: "Why are family members still allowed to go out of their homes for non-essential matters?"

MG BRITO:

"We have not implemented a total lockdown for all the families that live here on post...But I'd like to go ahead and talk to something I talked to at the beginning, where we need your cooperation. So limit your outdoor activities. I'm doing the same with my own family, to help minimize any chance of infection or spread of the virus.

"So, no, we have not implemented a hard rule that you can't go do things that are needed to support your family, like go to a hospital appointment, gas station, commissary and PX,

"But I would ask that if you don't have to, simply stay home. And that's no different from some of the guidance we've heard across the nation. Simply stay home to help our nation, and the state, flatten that curve of exposure, the bell curve of exposure there, and get to the right of this problem.

"Thanks, Ben."

MODERATOR: Reads question: "When will testing be more readily available? For the ones who have symptoms but have tested negative for influenza, I know they are currently very limited and only testing people with underlying conditions."

MG BRITO tells says COL Hoffman will answer that question.

COL HOFFMAN:

"As I've mentioned previously, we are extensively screening everyone that physically shows up to any of our facilities. As I mentioned, those CDC-related questions related to signs and symptoms. Travel to certain high-risk areas. Or exposure or potential exposure to anyone that may have COVID-19 or is suspected to have COVID-19.

"That screening process then leads us to the testing process. So based on how those questions are answered, that provider that is working with that patient then will make that determination if that patient will need to be tested.

"We're working through the same process that many of our community partners are as well, working with the same labs. We don't currently have the ability to test within our lab at Martin Army. But we're doing everything we can to expand that capability as our community partners are, and really across the entire nation.

"So doing everything we can, again, screening very strictly, everyone that comes forward, using our Nurse Advice Line. Also that COVID-19 hotline that I mentioned, to then direct folks in that may need to be tested. So, again, doing everything we can to expand our capabilities as we move forward."

MG BRITO:

"And I can say, Ben, that our ability to sample is greater now than it was two weeks ago, and while I know we've also, through, I'll probably mess the acronym up, through the military regional health commands, are hoping to get a testing capacity at the hospital as well. And when that arrives there'll be some required training, for our Soldiers, [word indistinct] for your clinicians to do it, and that [word indistinct] enhance our ability to do it on post."

MODERATOR: Reads question: "Why are only critical condition patients or those coming from overseas, getting tested for COVID-19? I've heard that Fort Benning only has 60 to 70 tests. Why do we not have more? Is it an availability issue or a financial issue?"

MG BRITO:

"If you rewind the clock about two weeks, when you saw other countries that had a bigger threat and a higher number of cases than we did, and than we do right now, specifically in the state of Georgia, which is lower than some others, we did have to focus the screening capability capacity somewhere.

"And I can tell you from personal knowledge and decisions, for Soldiers that we had in late February, early month of March, that came to Fort Benning from countries like South Korea and Italy and other places, of course, given this category of those countries, we had to screen them, and in some cases quarantine them, before they were released, I hate to say they were released, but allowed to continue with the specific training.

"And as Melissa, as Col. Hoffman said upfront, we did have a shortage – a low number of testing ability, sampling ability in the beginning. That continues to improve daily and weekly."

COL HOFFMAN:

"As you mentioned again, as the screening process is key. We have had a limited number. We're constantly working to improve that. As General Brito mentioned, we are working with our regional health command as well as with TRADOC to potentially get testing capability here within our own lab, which again would give us some more leeway in terms of testing."

COL HOFFMAN repeats here earlier comments, recorded above, on importance of the pre-screening process and the questions that are asked as part of it, and repeats importance of the pre-screening process she outlined earlier. Also repeats that those in quarantine don't necessarily have to be tested and that if one doesn't feel well and has some of the signs and symptoms she mentioned, say at home, call the Nurse Advice line, and be told what to do from there.

MODERATOR: Reads question; "If there are positive cases, what will happen with those Soldiers who live off-base with their family? Will they still be able to go on and off-base without any issues?"

MG BRITO:

"No, preferably. And the most we can do is to tell them to self-quarantine at home, or in some cases can be directed to be quarantined in one of the [word indistinct] places on post. And this goes back to some of the points [word indistinct] upfront.

"We, quite frankly in this situation, would rely on the honesty and cooperation of that said family. Of that 479 I mentioned upfront that are under some level of quarantine status, some of those are now self-quarantined at their houses off-post, whether Muskogee County or another county.

"So we can track, and have, and do, the names of that said Soldier, if it happened to be a Soldier, a family member, and of course can have those names at the access gate.

"But one, just rely on the honesty and the cooperation of the family not to come on post. And that is clearly something that can be monitored at all of our access control points. So that the virus or chance of spread just doesn't come through the gates.

"So I would say yes, and a yes. Something we can definitely monitor. And we would ask for the full cooperation of that family that may be off-post. Thanks, Ben."

MODERATOR: Reads question: "With the stop-movement travel restrictions, will those with PCS orders to report to their new duty station in mid-May be pushed back to a later date as well? If not, how would it work with getting household goods scheduled if scheduling isn't currently available until after May the 11th?"

MG BRITO:

"Certainly. Let me take that on, Ben, 'cause I know of many that it applies to now, that are at Fort Benning or wanting to come to Fort Benning.

"And I think that the crux of the question, to report to a class on May 15th, I obviously need to start moving before the travel ban.

"So the analysis, the work that we've done, not just this command but all of the others as well, is to inform our higher headquarters, these are the course dates, I'm just using an example, the course dates that we have from May 1st to May 30th. Across the enterprise, the Army in this case, they're doing that.

"Now with the current travel ban there maybe some exceptions for a person to move early on, to the next station. But quite frankly I can for sure talk to the higher level [word indistinct] enterprise.

"Looking at all the PCS assignments, deeming those that may be mission-critical and those exceptions may be made to allow a family to pack out and move before the travel ban is lifted, but please know that last week I mentioned, if it's a government travel at this point, before the 11th of May, it will not be funded and not happen.

"But, long and short of it, we're looking at all the commands, both Training and Doctrine Command and Forces Command, and it is a big group, quite frankly, of folks that may have been scheduled to move.

"At this point not all orders have not been amended or cancelled but I can say through our Human Resources Command all those are being looked at, and may require an amendment or an exception to allow some to move before the travel ban, which I would say looks less likely, but more likely that those travel orders would be amended so that you can just move everything to the right.

"And I'll just throw an example out there. Say you're comin' here to Fort Benning and you have a course that's gonna to start on the 12th of May, which is the day after the travel ban.

"Obviously, you'll have to move ahead of that if you want to be here. But I anticipate, using that case, is those orders or that person that's gonna to attend a school, will be moved to the right and attend a future course.

"That's a long way of saying at this point, if it's inside the travel ban, the orders will probably be moved to the right. What I would ask, especially for those not at Fort Benning, is to talk to your respective branch rep, make sure all of that is laid out very clearly, talk to your respective landlord, if it applies, if it's putting you in a bad situation.

"There are some policies that allow some conveniences to Soldiers to ensure they're not penalized with leases and stuff like that. The Soldiers [word/s indistinct (Relief Act???)].

"Those things are out there, those services work and they're working now. So share that with your chain-of-command. I don't say that to give the bumper sticker solution. But they do work. Fully understand this is inconvenient for many, pre-travel ban. And if it's close to the lifting of the travel ban, some adjustments will have to be made."

COL SCALIA:

"Thank you, sir. Just to add to that, sir. I agree, I think orders will be, report dates for next duty station will be extended to the right.

"Expectation management for everybody though, for everybody. When this is lifted, people are able to start moving again, there's going to be some natural friction and bottle-up of people that will need to be going.

"So transportation appointments will be tough, as everybody's try to make a mad dash out. So it'll just be difficult. Transportation will [indistinct] the appointments as best they can. And if you have any questions now, try to lay on transportation office, and you can find this on our website, is 706-545-4900. But again, please expectation management. It will be tough once this is lifted and everybody's trying to leave. Thank you, sir."

MODERATOR: Reads question: "Do we know how long the ban on visitors will last? There seems to be some misunderstandings regarding the exceptions for visitors. Will families who will be delivering babies allowed to have a visitor come on post to help watch other children or help while in labor?"

MG BRITO:

"Sure. A couple of points to that. But the decision, at this point, I'm probably not looking to lift the visitors' ban. It'll stay in place until our threat on Fort Benning and our local communities lessens, kind of flattens out.

"And that decision is at my level in coordination with our staffs. Just to understand where things are at. So I can't put a timeline on it. I don't see it lifting – being relaxed, before a month from now. It may coincide with the travel ban, which is probably a good measure.

"The garrison commander can talk to some of those other issues. Now we can definitely as he mentioned up front, work exceptions. If someone needs to get on post for an emergency, such as delivering baby or some other ID card issue or other things. Although an ID card might not be a life or death emergency. But Matt, if you would, please talk to that a little bit more."

COL SCALIA:

"I will, sir. So as I mentioned before, delivery of a baby is a great example of where we'd want to grant an exception to policy. For all my children were born, my mother or mother-in-law came down to assist. So we understand the importance. Happy to help in that situation.

"We've had other questions. If you need a new ID card, you can call the ID card section. We can set up an appointment. That certainly would be another reason to allow you access. So you can get that ID card so you can come on, at will, as all ID card holders are able to do now."

MG BRITO:

"Now I can add to that. For the exceptions that are made, such as the mom comin' to help the family out, or working with our medical team, they can expect some level of screening.

"So that we just don't allow an increased chance for the infection to come on post. Not saying that it would. But there will be some level of medical screening to ensure the individual or individuals that need to come on post aren't indeed a carrier of some type. Thanks."

MODERATOR: Reads question: "As expressed in previous letters to keep families informed, there has been increased field time. Do Soldiers have access to basic needs regarding hygiene, such as access to running water for hand-washing and grooming that is essential to prevent the spread of COVID-19 according to the CDC?"

MG BRITO:

"Sure, Ben. Let me take that one on. We did address that the last town hall and I can say, specifically, in this case, for the One-Station unit training Soldiers and other basic training type soldiers that are training in the field, it actually improves their chance to be away from a risk of spread by being at a controlled, more isolated location in the field.

"Now what many of the brigades have done, I talked this a little bit last week, and I'll just give an example. If there's a three to four day training [word indistinct. density???] at a basic rifle marksmanship range, as opposed to goin' out, training all day, and then walking back, sleeping in the barracks, they can just stay out, under controlled environment and the great supervision of the drill sergeants, for four to five days.

"In that location, part of their craft, to be Infantry Soldiers or Armor Soldiers as well, we do teach the field craft, so they'll learn how to operate in the field and live in the field. We do give access to food, of course. Hot meals and field meals, the old MREs which many of you know about as well.

"They do have access to keep themselves clean, through contained water, sometimes hoses and other things that are out at these respective ranges. Or maybe a little more austere if they're in a training area.

"The long and short of it: yes, the fieldcraft is very important. They will get food to keep themselves sustained and strong. They will have access to water and things for them to shave and brush their teeth, while in a field location. And part of the instruction by these great drill sergeants as well, which I'm sure many dads out there can possibly relate to, do the simple things like changing your socks and other things, to keep them healthy in a field condition.

"So, for all the parents that are concerned about it, yes, they're being taken care of, yes it is an austere condition for them because they are Infantry and Armor Soldiers, but we do ensure the logistics out there to take care of them. Thank you."

MODERATOR: Reads question: "We've got time for about three more questions. So, have any trainees, Soldiers or higher-ups, been tested for COVID-19? What protocols will take place if someone does test positive? And, sort of a second part, a different direction, Can our Soldiers who already graduated keep in touch with families more often for updates from both parties?"

MG BRITO:

"Okay. Well, there's a two-part question, I'll start with the second half first Graduating Soldiers will be given access to social media events and have means, cellphones and others, so they can keep in touch with their families and let them know what's goin' on.

"I can also quite confidently say the brigade leadership of all ranks, through the social media, Facebook and other pages, will also let the families know what's going on.

"To the first part of the question, it doesn't matter what your rank is. If you test positive, you're gonna to go to quarantine. Highly recommended. Whether that's self-quarantine in your home or one of the locations that we need to have.

"This virus knows no rank, no skill set, no MOS. It's gonna happen.

"Now, truth in lending, Ben? I don't know, if any higher-ups have been tested. That is indeed something that would be private for them, and I do know that we have not, to my knowledge, had to test any trainees. We have tested some new recruits that have come in, and if they needed to be tested they're in quarantine at this time to minimize – or reduce – any risk of spread going to the trainee population that is currently at Fort Benning training now."

COL SCALIA:

"Sir, we've had a lot of questions about mail to the trainees. Please continue to mail your Soldiers in training, even if they're graduates and they're here in a holdover status. Those addresses are still good.

"If there's been holdup in mail, please, if you can contact the unit through their Facebook page, to inquire, or you can always submit what we call Interactive Customer Evaluation card, an ICE card. Ad that can go direct to our Directorate of Human Resources, and they can help try to find out where the delay may be caused in the mail."

MG BRITO:

"You know, Ben, on the higher-up issue, which I'll define as leaders, the only distinction may be that he or she can self-quarantine in their home, if they should live on post. Now please keep in mind, this is really quite frankly to everybody that would apply to your family. So if a leader, of any rank, has to quarantine themselves in their house, their family's quarantined as well. So all of that has to go into the decision."

MODERATOR: Reads question: "Will Uchee Creek Campground and golf courses be closing as well?"

COL SCALIA:

"At this time there is no plan to close the golf course or Uchee Creek. We assess they're outdoor activities. They are such that people provide the proper dispersion, that social distancing. And good for people to get outside, not crammed up in their homes, their barracks, and be active. So we intend on keeping those open."

MODERATOR: Reads question: "What point, if at all, will Fort Benning consider sheltering in place? It seems that this is the only way to slow the spread of the virus, considering the necessary movements on the installation."

MG BRITO:

"Sure. That's actually a very important question and one I know I personally think about quite a bit and I've talked to the leaders on that.

"And I cannot give you a hard number that would cause us to shelter in place. But I can say, and it would be a decision I'd have to take quite deliberately with a lot of thought, is if the spread gets big, high numbers and quickly, we may consider sheltering in place at that point. Which would mean no flow in and no flow out.

"And it's quite obvious the impacts to our Soldiers and our families and employees, that have to come on post to work. Big impact there, and perhaps those that need to go off post for medical care and other things, big impact there. In the near-term obviously, churches and schools, not a big impact for those who have to go out.

"I can say, although there is a lot of authority to make decisions at my level, that would be one that would have to be shared with a higher command, and a condition that would impact total shelter in place and no movement, would be Soldiers comin' in and Soldiers that are going out as well.

"I mentioned up front, our important Army mission cannot stop, and our piece of that is not stopping also.

"So, long and short, if we had a massive spread, lots of infections that may warrant a complete shutdown of some type, consistent with what many cities are doing."

MODERATOR: Reads final question: "Sir, we only have time for one more question. This'll be our final question. Why is 316th Cav still doing physical training every morning? It seems like an unnecessary risk being taken because there are so many Soldiers gathering in one area, running in formations or groups, even at the squad level. Completing the mission is important. However gathering to do PT seems like an unnecessary risk."

MG BRITO:

"Okay. Seems like there's more to that question, but I'll answer that first part first. And I don't need to pinpoint any one specific unit.

"But I can say the direct guidance and my great sergeant majors are helping enforce this some, as well, is that we do need to continue to make sure we are combat-ready Soldiers when and if called upon.

"That is not a recruiting bumper sticker. So the training, within the mitigation, needs to continue. Physical training, within mitigation, needs to continue. And quiet honest, it's counter-culture, against our culture, to not have the '40 inches all around' when we do physical training.

"So what we have specifically, both verbally in orders and writing in orders, have told all the units to work physical dispersion. If you don't need to do a group run, if you can do individual runs, and just spread out, on the many, many field locations that we have here at Fort Benning.

"Not going to the gymnasiums which are naturally gonna be close, just spread out and do some exercise on the many fields that we have.

"Now, that is something that'll continue, we'll have to continue to monitor and stop people if they're doing the wrong thing. And it may get to a point where we just, we'll put a directive out.

"But at this point, the commanders and command sergeant majors are empowered to keep the Soldiers physically fit, keeping in mind the dispersion, and the group stuff just needs to stop.

Thanks."

MODERATOR: *turns over to panel for closing comments.*

COL SCALIA:

"Sir, I'll just add, get a lot of questions about what we continue to keep open and get recommendations. I want all to understand, this is in collaboration with the unit leadership and what they feel is in the best interest of their Soldiers and families.

"Keep in mind we have lots of Soldiers living in the barracks. Not just trainees but permanent party as well. So we have their needs to consider. And always of course in consultation with the medical community. Thank you sir."

MG BRITO:

"Okay, thanks Matt and Melissa. Well, I'm gonna use a quote from one of my former bosses, that this is really hard government work. An overused term but this is a long marathon for us as well. And I can't put a timeline on it to say it's gonna end in two weeks or three weeks or four weeks. It'll end when the conditions are set.

"And when I say 'end,' the travel ban, our graduates are able to graduate and leave, bring back family days, open the gyms, those conditions will come back on line when the conditions are set. We see both at Fort Benning, Muscogee Country, all the other counties in the state, quite frankly, that curve is starting to flatten.

"I do definitely think it's gonna be several weeks, and we'll keep you informed.

"I would like to kinda finish where I started last week in asking for your continued patience, understanding and cooperation. Critical.

"This is very hard. I'm just gonna lay it out. This is hard. Hard in that we're also gonna continue to train our mission. That is important for the Army and important for Training and Doctrine Command.

"And so far it's going well for us. But I don't want to be naive enough to say that the threat was not going to continue. The virus is going to continue to spread.

"We may very well have some positive cases on Fort Benning, both for Soldiers, civilians and family members as well, and we'll mitigate and treat it the best we can and make the prudent decisions to protect our force, family members, civilians and Soldiers included, of all ranks, the best we can as well.

"But very much need total teamwork with this. Understanding with this. We'll continue to be as transparent as we can within the laws, within the privacy of said patients. And we will get through this together.

"It is gonna be demanding. But as I said last week, and we will in our next future town halls as well, teamwork, cooperation, understanding, we will get over this, we will get through this, and we will get back to normalcy soon.

"I can't, well I shouldn't say soon. One day. But I need your cooperation and support. And thank you so much. We will look to do a town hall weekly, and if we don't have it to this scale, at least there will be some type of video message that we'll post on our public pages and address those issues that are most important to our families, whether it's the closures or the hours or the PX, or how the access control points are going to work, or how things are taking place at our hospital.

"I deliver this message not only to all the moms and dads across the globe quite frankly, that may be listening, to the Soldiers and families here on Fort Benning, and our community partners outside the gate as well. Thank you, very much.

END TRANSCRIPT

**(Transcribed by Franklin S. Fisher, Command Information Officer, MCoE/Fort Benning
Public Affairs Office)**